

Historical and Cultural Basis of Jharkhandi Nationality

BASANT KUMAR MEHTA

Jharkhand has preserved its relics of all different ages. Even in a period a lakh years earlier, human beings used to live in his area. None of the communities who reside in Jharkhand at present can claim that they are the true descendants of those primitive people. A study of the Brahminist literature including vedas indicate that in the eyes of the Brahmins there was no distinction among the Aryans¹, Asurs, Dravidians and Nagas. This is probably the reason why there is no historical proof of mutual conflicts or wars between Aryans, Dravidians, Asurs and Nagas. There is every chance that these names indicate the same set of people, because the Brahmins have called themselves 'Sur' (Bhudev) and the rest as 'Asur'. In all, there occurred thirteen wars between the Devas and Asurs.

-
1. e.g. 'Oh Indra, you cut into pieces both of those unfriendly ones and the Dasas—the Aryans and the Asurs, in the manner the forests are cut.'—Rig Veda, 6/33/1 or the Aryans mentioned separately and after Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Shudras in Yaju Veda, 26/2.

I. Historical Origin of Jharkhand Communities

It appears from the historical context that the early inhabitants of Jharkhand belonged to either of the three communities—*Nishad* (Austrie), Dravidian and Asur. The Mundas, Kharias, Korwas, Korkus, Birhors, Bhumijas, Kherwars, Santals, Ho's, Mal Paharias etc. belong basically to the 'Nishad' group of people. Studies of the Munda-speaking families reveal² that they had immigrated in two different streams from the Central Asia, once before the Christian Era and then again around the 12th century A.D. The Oraon, Nagesia and Sadan communities belong basically to the Dravidian group of people. The Oraons entered Jharkhand from Rohtasgarh, at the time of Sher Shah (16th Century A.D.). The Sadans came to reside over Jharkhand in the first century B.C., when the Satbahans of Andhra had occupied Bihar and made "their horses drink the water of the Ganges". The Sadanis are the descendents of Satbahans. However, owing to the disintegration of their social order, the Cheros, Baraiks, Chik-Baraiks, Rautia etc. have become known as different tribes. "Chik" is originally a Dravidian word, meaning 'small'. In the same way the word "Sad" means 'horse'.

According to the Munda tradition, when the Munda came, the Asurs had been the inhabitants of this area. Following Shri Ananta Prasad Shastri, the Ranchi District Gazetteer writes that the Nagas were a tribe included in the Asur race from which have originated the names like Nagpur, Chotanagpur etc.³ Since they found that the country was occupied by the Naga people, the Munda too have named this land as 'Nagdesha'.⁴ In the mythology, Jimutbahan had sacrificed his life to save Naga named Shankhachuda from its enemy Garuda and had put an end to the terror created by the latter among the Nagas. The descendants of the Naga people even at present observe 'Jitia' festival to celebrate this success of Jimutbahana. A

2. J. H. Hutton, *Caste in India: Its Nature, Functions and Origins*. Oxford, 1961, No. 4.
3. Anant Prasad Banerjee Shastri, *Asur India* (1926) Cited in *District Gazetteer, Ranchi* (1970), pp. 41.
4. S. C. Roy, *The Mundas and their Country*, Bombay, 1970, pp. 334.

number of communities who now reside in Jharkhand celebrate Jitia, and are almost certainly the descendants of the ancient Nagas. Further, among the many meanings of the word 'Kurma' one is snake (naga); and that may well be the origin of the name 'Kurmi'. In the same way the meaning of the word 'Ahi' is also snake and the name 'Ahir' has probably been derived from that. The Nagbanshis, Kurmis, Ahirs, Saraks, etc., those who observe 'Jitia', are the communities who have originated from Naga People.

All these communities are found today almost strictly within the confines of the greater Jharkhand*, which itself is an indication of their local origins. There exist a few other communities, e.g. Jhora, Bhuinya, Bhogta, Ghasi, Pan (Swasi) etc. who are found only in the Jharkhand area, and are more probably related with one of the three races discussed above. A number of these communities are known as Scheduled Tribes at present, and are accepted as the original inhabitants of this area. Others e.g. the Sadanis, Nagbanshis, Kurmis or Bauris are included as castes within the Hindu communities and are often confused as to be the immigrants since there is a tendency to consider that all Hindus were immigrants. Under the influence of Brahminism, the feudal families of Jharkhand have tried for long to depict themselves as distinct from the local people. They had invented various stories regarding their origins e.g. (1) Ratu—child reared by a snake, accepted as the king of Mundas and established the Nagbanshi dynasty, (2) Panchkot—child reared by cow, accepted as the king among the Kurmis, (3) Barahabhum—child reared by pig (Baraha), (4) Bonai—child reared by peacock near a Kadamba tree and founder of Kadambanshi dynasty, (5) Patkam—claiming ancestry to Bikramditya, (6) Jashpur—outsider Kharwar Rajput accepted as King by the Kharwars, similarly (7) Gangapur—Keshri Rajput, (8) Surguja—Rakhshel Rajput, (9) Kariya—Chauhan Rajput, and the chiefs of Dhalbhum, Porahat, Saraikela, Kharswan, Bandhgaon, Karaikela, Chainpur etc. all claiming their ancestors were outsiders (Rajdom Kshatriya, Suryabanshi Kshatriya or Chandrabanshi Kshatriya)

* e.g. the area of inclusive of the parts of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa which is included in Jharkhand cultural region.

accepted by the local people as their kings.⁵ But the very fact that none of these families were able to provide any testimony in favour of their outsider origin is the best proof of those being concocted. Yet, their attempts have gone a long way to confuse the self-identity of Jharkhand.

Some other communities, e.g. Domra, Mahli, Turi, Chamar etc. are not confined to Jharkhand. But they are found all over Jharkhand, and are residing here for long. The fact that all these communities, including the last named ones, are residing in a particular geographic region for a long time, and most of them are found only in this region, is enough to help the development of a culture, specific to Jharkhand area and distinct from other areas. This culture, the 'Jharkhandi culture', is a community culture and is not much influenced by Brahminism.

II. Are the Kurmis Autochthones?

Available space will not permit such a discussion about all disputable communities found in Jharkhand. Here I will confine the discussion to only one of the most numerous communities found in Jharkhand who are now considered as Hindus and are often considered as outsiders in consequence. In particular, they are considered to be the same Kurmi caste found in Gangetic Bihar and U.P. But the similarity exists only in the group name. The Kurmis of Jharkhand who follow the totamic *gotra* (clan) system similar to the tribal people are surely distinct from the Hindu Kurmis of U.P. and adjacent Bihar. No Kurmi of the Gangetic plains will marry in the families of Jharkhandi Kurmis. The Jharkhandi Kurmis are still in the habit of eating not only chicken and pork but also insects like white ants. The Kurmis of Chotanagpur are called a 'Dhorr' Kurmi. Their women expect to be pregnant by drinking the water that flows over the male organ of the Idol named Irgunath and wear iron bangles on the occasion of marriages. All these indicate their

5. W. Hunter, *Statistical Account of Sengal*, Vol. XVII, London, 1877, pp. 136-139, 175-6, 195-6, 205-217, 221-2, 282-292, of Concept Publishing, Delhi edition.

Autochthones (n)
an original or
indigenous inhabitant
of a place.

tribal origins. By an order of the India Government⁶, in 1913, the Kurmis were considered in the same bracket with the Mundas and Santhals. For political reasons, the names of Ghasis, Pans and Kurmis have been dropped later from the official list of Scheduled Tribes.

Even to this date there exists the tribal custom of mockfights in Kurmi marriages. In their marriages the most sacred custom is to put brass bangles which indicates that there existed the system of exogamous marriages by capture among the Kurmis during the bronze age. Following the slaughter of Mahisha-Asur by Goddess Durga, the Asurs were absorbed in her clan. The *gotra* names like Gosur, Bakasur, Karwar (Bhainsasur), Gaur etc. among the Kurmis, indicate the influence of Asurs on them.

6. The Gazettes of India
Published by Authority

No

181

Simla
Judicial

Saturday May 3, 1913

The 2nd May 1913

No. 550. Whereas the tribes known as the Munda, Oraons, Santal, Hos, Bhumij, Kherias, Ghasis, Gonds, Khendhas, Korwas, Kurmis, Male Saurias and Pans dwelling in the province of Bihar and Orissa have customary rules of succession and inheritance incompatible with the provisions of the Indian Succession Act, 1865 (X of 1865) and in is expedient to apply the provisions of the Act to the Member of those tribes.

In exercise of the powers conferred by section 332 of the Indian Succession Act 1865 (X of 1865) The Governor General in Council is pleased to exempt all Mundas, Oraons, Santal, Hos, Bhumij, Kharias, Ghasis, Gonds, Khondas, Korwas, Kurmis, Male Saurias and Pans dwelling in the province of Bihar and Orissa from the operation of the provisions of the Act retrospectively from the passing of the Act.

Provided that notification shall not be hold to effect any person in regard the rights a decision contrary to the effect has already been given by a competent civil court".

Certified to be correct copy

Sd/- Illegible

Record Keeper

Commissioner's Office

Chotanagpur Division

Date : 16-6-76

Although Kurmis belong to the Asur (Naga) group of people, some amount of intermixing has occurred with the Mundas and Santhals which is evident in such gotra names as Birhor, Hansda, Tete etc. found among the Kurmis too. Some other gotra names like Tiru, Chil etc. indicate the influence of Dravidas on Kurmis. The Bhumijas found in Manbhum are from the same stock as the Mundas as is evident from the fact that intermarriage between these two communities occur freely. However, unlike the Mundas, the Bhumij community resides in the midst of Kurmi settlements. It is notable that although the Kurmis and the Bhumijas differ widely in their social customs and languages, the two groups are socially accepted to each other. Following the Naga custom which exists even to this date, the Bhumijas are accepted as *Sahia* or *Mitta* (befriended) by the Kurmis. Similar relations are found between Kurmis and Santhal. All these social phenomena of inter-community relations need hundreds of years for being effective and bears testimony to the fact that the Kurmis are residing in this regions for several centuries along with the Munda and Santhal tribes.

In fact, it may be of little surprise should the Kurmis happen to inhabit in this area even earlier than the Munda tribes, who are often accepted as the earliest and original inhabitants of this region. Indirect evidences like the travel accounts of Sumaschic, Fahien or Huen Tsang had never referred to any point which might indicate the existence of Munda in this area. According to Sri Sarat Chandra Roy, the first Munda dynasty was established here in 64 A.D.⁷ But the discovery of two silver coins of Vim Kadfisis I (200 B.C.) in the richest Munda settlement in Koel basin, of two gold coins of Vim Kadfists II at Kumharia of Lohardaga and three gold coins of Hubiska at Belwadag near Khunti⁸ indicate that this area was well-settled before the time of the Mundas. None of the important rivers in this area e.g. Sankh, Koel, Damodar (Pushpakaran, Pokarna), Swarnrekha etc. is named in Mundari language. Then who were the settlers here earlier than the Mundas? There are many evidences in favour that these settlers were the

7. S. C. Roy, *op. cit.*, pp. 77.

8. *District Gazetteer Ranchi*, 1970, pp. 39.

Kurmis. According to Dr. G. S. Ghurye, the Kurmis had to emigrate from Central India to the forests of Jharkhand because of the pressure from the Gonds and the Kamars, in a remote past when the Kurmis were still doing "daha" (shifting) cultivation.⁹ Kamars are found settled in all Kurmi villages in Jharkhand. It appears that the Munda immigrants had compelled the Kurmis to move eastwards leaving their original settlements at Kurmgarh on the borders of Ranchi and Surguja districts. At present Kurmis inhabit the area east the richest Munda settlements, but are extinct in Kurmgarh area. Most probably the pressure from Sadans too had forced the Kurmis to move further east. Sadans were settled in western Jharkhand even in first century B. C. and the Satbahans had fought the Kushans which may explain the discovery of Kushan coins in this region. Among the Sadans, there is a clan called Baraik whose martial origin is established. On the whole, by the pressure of these people the Kurmis had to move eastwards and are found at present in Ranchi, Hazaribagh, Dhanbad, Santhal Parganas, Singhbhum, Purulia, Midnapur, Bankura, Sundergarh, Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar districts only. It is notable that their settlements are completely encircled on the west by the Munda settlements. In the historic time, the Kurmis had built up a highly developed civilization and a powerful state in this region. It appears from the available facts that the famous king Shashanka (seventh century A.D.), who had defeated Harshabardhan, was a Naga king and his capital Karnasubarna was located in the Kurmi land of Jharkhand. But its detailed proof is beyond the scope of this paper.¹⁰

III. Cultural Confluence

Habitually, the Jharkhandis are worshippers of nature. Their religious beliefs do not extend much beyond that. The moon, the snake and the water symbolises the process of reproduction.¹¹ All the three are incorporated in Shiva, and

9. G. S. Ghurye, *Aborigins So Called and Their Future*, 1941, pp. 12.

10. for details, see author's note in *Shalpatra*, (Dhanbad, in Hindi), no. 4, February 1978, pp. 37-39.

11. Rambilas Sharma, *Bhasa Aur Samaj* (in Hindi), New Delhi, 1961, pp. 514.

are worshipped in the form of His 'linga' (male reproductive organ). In the world outlook of the Jharkhandis, Shiva is the reason of creation, sustenance and destruction. Jharkhandis never felt the need to know more than these primitive beliefs. The religious waves of Buddhism, Jainism or Hinduism have not been able to move them much from this ground. For example, the Sarak community, which has been highly influenced—in the standard of Jharkhand—by these religions, are so great worshipper of nature that they worship even the plough and discover lives in inanimate objects. Although, by the influence of Jainism they feel shy to listen to the word 'slaughter', nevertheless in certain festivals they sacrifice imitations of animals and thus preserve the traces of their traditional religion. Saraks do not accept any food from the Brahmins just like Oraon¹², Kurmi¹³ or Santhal. In general, the Jharkhandis have preserved their gods and goddesses. Along with Utur, Gahera, Karma, Jitia, Sarna, Bansingh, Gram Devta, such godlings as Darha, Kudra, etc. are worshipped.

Not that, in all the fields the Jharkhandis have been able to resist the outside influence. Ahir and Kurmi priests were ousted from Baidyanathdham and Basukinath temples; in the Durga temple of Tamar, Brahmin priest has been appointed parallel to the Munda priest. Along with Shaivaite rituals, the Mundas, Santhals and Ho's also practice Vaishnava Kirtans (song). Some of the Bhumij and Munda families have embraced Hinduism.¹⁴ After the Raja of Panchkot embraced Hinduism¹⁵ the martial dance of the Kurmis called 'Chhou dance' was made to accept Hindu mythological anecdotes.¹⁶ The Kurmis were not recognised as Kshatriya by the Maharashtrian Brahmins of

12. Radhakrishna, "Bhed Bhawhee Galat Hai", *Adivasi*, Hindi Weekly, Ranchi, Govt. of Bihar, Gantantra Diwas Visheshank. 1926, January, 1978, pp. 3.

13. H. H. Risley, *Tribes, and Castes of Bengal*, 1891, XVI (I) pp. 536 also J. H. Hutton, *Caste in India*, pp. 76.

14. Roy, *op. cit.*, pp. 80.

15. S. Abasthi, "Sare Bharat ki kala Me Audh ke Ram" *Dharmyug* (Hindi weekly), Bombay, October 8, 1978, pp. 11.

16. Aloknanda Ghosh, "Nritya ke Samapt Hone Tak Wah Yudh Karta Raha" *Kadambini*, New Delhi (Hindi monthly), May 1974, pp. 129.

Bero and Oriya Acharya of Seraikela ; but they agreed to allow them some more status ("Jal Chal") than earlier.¹⁷ However, even this recognition was an achievement for someone considered so long as 'unclean' in the Hindu caste hierarchy. The process of enchantment among the Kurmis was initiated. In absence of a conscious intelligentsia and in the desire to earn some social status, the Kurmis surrendered all privileges to protection under the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act.¹⁸ Nibaran Chandra Dasgupta of Purulia, a man famous in the Gandhian Movement, helped the culmination of the process. He was doing a peculiar type of reformatory work among the Kurmis, which was called "Tribalism or Kshatriya culture". During the Census of 1931, he did not only suggest the Kurmis to declare themselves as Hindus but also instructed the enumerators to record all of them as Hindus. The Kurmis were thoroughly 'reformed' in the Census. Nibaran Chandra Dasgupta was declared a saint. The area where the office of Adimjati Seva Mandal is located in Ranchi was renamed Nibaranpur. Who knows whether the Kurmis were thus defeated in their stronghold by the unimaginative action of a saint or were deprived by a cunningly conceived political conspiracy against them ?

At the same time it is true that Nibaran Chandra Dasgupta had saved the Kurmis from mass conversion into Christianity. The Christian Missionaries were active among the Kurmis. The first Christian priest of local origin in Chotanagpur, namely Polush Nemo (vill. Ilu Jargo, dt. Purulia) was a Kurmi. The Missionaries had already translated the Bible into Kurmali. But habitually the worshipper of the nature, Kurmis were never much overtaken by any other religion. They have preserved their identity by initiating the 'Gossaiyan Movement' among them.

Brahmin priests are not required in Kurmi rituals like in marriages and deaths. However, recently a trend is being

17. P. P. Mahato, "Ethnicity, Conflict and Integration, The Mahto Case", *Shilalipi* (in Bengali. Bi-monthly), Jamshedpur, No. 1, 1979, pp 46.

18. W. C. Lacey, "The Kurmis of Chotanagpur". Appendix V, Part I, Report, Vol. VII, *Bihar and Orissa, Census of India, 1931*. p. 291-4.

observed among the rich Kurmis—who feel ashamed at their Kurmi tribal origins—to invite Brahmin priests in such occasions.¹⁹ Some other communities, who have been influenced more by Hinduism, feel more inclined to engage Brahmins in such rituals. In many cases, the local Pahans (priests) have declared themselves Brahmins to meet such contingencies. Birsa Munda was a disciple of Guru Anandji Pandre, who belonged to the weaver caste. This caste is known by the name of Pan, Pand or Swansi and were considered included in tribes even a few decades ago. However, in the text books read in the schools of Bihar, the Guru of Birsa Munda has been named Anand Pande and described as a Brahmin by caste.²⁰ Probably the original Guru of Ratu Maharaj too was another Pandre. Later, when the king attained some better economic status, he established relations with Maharashtrian Brahmins.

In Jharkhandi marriages the custom is to pay bride-price which, according to Hindu religious texts is an "asuric" custom.²¹ The amount is decided on the consideration of economic conditions of the involved parties. Generally the amount is rupees five, five Sarees (womens' garment) and one pot of Arisa (sweet cooked bread of rice). Divorce is easy. Women married to others can be accepted as wives, which itself is a remnant of the *Rakshash* culture. Women are allowed to marry the second time, which is called 'sangha'.

In contrast to the rest of India, where dying persons are laid in contact with the earth, in Jharkhand, death while in contact with the earth is considered unholy. The Jharkhandis burn as well as cremate their corpses. The Sradh (final death ritual) is done on the tenth day. Just as it exists at present among the Kharias, the Kurmi women too used to assemble on the third day after the death to sympathise with the bereaved family. They would take bath and then in a community dinner would

19. V. B. Talwar, "Brahmanbad Aur Jharkhandi Sanskriti", *Shalpatra* (Hindi monthly), Dhanbad, no. 5, 1978, pp. 10.

20. e. g. "Bihar Baivab", (in Hindi), textbook for class III (New) Bihar State Text Book Corporation, Govt. of Bihar, pp. 80.

21. *Manu Smriti* 3/31.

share a fish. As a result of the reforms among the Kurmis, this ritual is observed among them at present on the tenth day, and the fish is only touched as a token of the traditional custom. On the occasion of the final death ritual the Kurmis wait in the night for the soul to return as an insect.²² This is similar to the Bhuinyas and Gonds of Jharkhand. However, similar custom exists even outside Jharkhand, among the Lhota Nagas of Assam and the Kunbis of Maharashtra.

Such are the outlines of local culture of Jharkhand. Evidently, the Naga, Sadan and the primitive tribal cultures have survived in this land even after two-thousand-years-long influence of Brahminism. The Jharkhandis have survived by far out of the *Varnashram* division of Hinduism. The dynamics over time, the intermixing of different cultures, the characteristic geographic personality of the region and the severe economic backwardness has imparted a distinction to the society and culture in the Jharkhand region which is peculiar to this region alone. This culture should properly be called 'Jharkhandi culture', the people who share this culture constitute the 'Jharkhandi nation'.

IV. Problem of "Ex-Tribals"

The Jharkhandi communities have been converted in varying degrees to Hindus, Muslims and Christians by the influence of these various streams of religions. The degree of their conversion has been judged by the 'experts' and they have been categorised as 'Scheduled Tribe', 'Hindu', 'Muslim' or 'Christian'. Ironically, the tribes who have been converted to Christians, still enjoy the privileges of protective land legislations like the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act. But if they are converted into Hindu or Muslims, they are not entitled to receive such protection. Nor are they considered for the Government jobs reserved for the benefits of underdeveloped communities, the educational facilities and scholarships extended to such communities etc., all reserved for those favoured to be Scheduled Tribes.

How developed are these communities that they need no protection?

22. Hutton, *op. cit.*, pp. 243 and 252.

Considering for example, the Kurmis of Jharkhand, their numerical strength is about 45 lakhs.²³ Not a single member of this community is required to pay any agriculture income tax. Even now the Kurmi tenants have to pay tributes to the Munda and Bhumij landlords on the occasion of *Paus Sankranti*. Not a single member of this numerous community is found employed in the Judiciary and Civil services in either Bihar, W. Bengal or Orissa. Not one is found in I.A.S., I.F.S. or in I.P.S. In the Central and State Secretariat services the community has got no share. Among the Kurmis, in total there are two engineers, four doctors in government services. No one owns even a medium-sized factory.

The Kurmis are no exception. Precisely the same is the condition of all Jharkhandi communities who are excluded from the government list of Scheduled Tribes. It must have been evident from the earlier discussion that all communities in Jharkhand have been partially influenced by Hinduism etc., and all communities have resisted against complete conversion from its traditional religious and culture practices. Thus, the only 'crime' the communities like the Kurmis did were that they were marginally more Hinduised than the others. For this alone they have to pay such a great price as to be refused of all protections earmarked for the "underdeveloped people," as well as are endangered today to be called even "dikus" (outsiders) by some of the Scheduled Tribes who came to Jharkhand in a much later period. But they are not discriminated against by the Bihari Contractor when in broad daylight they are thrown alive in the rearing streams of Subarnarekha along with their tribal co-workers.²⁴

23. Memorandum submitted to the Secretary Lok Sabha, Parliament House Annexe, New Delhi for inclusion of the Kurmis of Jharkhand in the Scheduled Tribe list of the constitution in the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes orders. (Amendment) Bill 1978. (I) Lohra Mahto-Secretary. Chotanagpur Kurmi Kalyan Samiti, Bandu, Ranchi. (II) Sunil Kumar Mahato, President Chotanagpur Plateau Kurmi Yuva Mahasabha, 8-J Naktala Road, Calcutta-47

24. At Jamshedpur :—It was in the middle of August 1978. When the country was busy in celebrating Independence Day, 9 Jharkhandis, tribes and extri-tribes, were thrown into the rearing stream of Subarnarekha in broad daylight by a Bihari contractor.

Appendix—1

Although *Jitiya* is observed outside Jharkhand as *Jiwit-Putrika' Vrata*, it was a naga festival, which has been duly spiritualised by the Brahmins later on; which spread over North India. *Satya Narayan Vrata* is a *Vrata* which has been introduced in the Hindu Society in or after Mohamedan period. The spiritualisation of tribal festivals is still on its way. "Karma" has been spiritualised by the Brahmin as *Parshwa Ekadash*. On their way of spiritualisation, the Brahmins wrote "Allahopnisad" and "Ishopnisad" to bring them into Hindu fold. But neither the Muslim nor the Christian are regarded as Hindu. It is *Jitiya*—which proclaims, that the descendants of Naga people are still in existence; though they might have been intellectual and cultural slave of the Brahmins.